THE DANGER OF GOD'S LOVE - John 3:16-21

IN THE LITERATURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT THE FOUR GOSPELS STAND OUT AS THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH. BUT EVEN IN THESE FOUR THERE ARE GREAT DIFFERENCES IN THE APPROACH TO AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE. MATTHEW, MARK AND LUKE ARE CALLED THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: THAT IS THE THREE GIVE A SYNOPSIS OR GENERAL REVIEW OF THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF OUR LORD. GENERALLY SPEAKING THEY AGREE ON ALL MAJOR POINTS, THEY TELL THE SAME STORY AND DIFFER GREATLY ONLY IN STYLE AND EMPHASIS. THE FOURTH GOSPEL, HOWEVER, IS DIFFERENT. IF LOOKED AT AS A BIOGRAPHY OR A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF JESUS' MINISTRY ITS INADEQUACIES ARE APPARENT. THERE ARE INSTANCES WHERE IT STANDS IN OUTRIGHT CONTRADICTION TO THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS. IT WAS WRITTEN MUCH LATER THAN THE OTHER THREE, PROBABLY AROUND THE YEAR 110 A.D. a full eighty years after JeSUS' MINISTRY.

WHAT MAKES IT SO VERY IMPORTANT TO US AND TO ALL OF CHRISTIANITY IS ITS EDITORIAL NOTES. THE WRITER DID NOT INTEND TO WRITE A BIOGRAPHY, HE WASN'T SATISFIED WITH THE BLUNT FACTS. HE WAS SO MOVED BY HIS TASK THAT HE FOUND HIMSELF COMPELLED TO ADD HIS INTERPRETATIONS, HIS EDITORIALS TO THE TEXT AND WE ARE THE BETTER FOR THEM. IT IS ONE OF THESE EDITORIALS THAT WE ARE CONCERNED WITH THIS MORNING.

THE THIRD CHAPTER OF JOHN BEGINS WITH AN ACCOUNT OF NICODEMUS TALKING WITH JESUS, A STORY THAT MAY BE FOUND IN ALL THE GOSPELS. NICODEMUS WAS A PHARISEE, AN EDUCATED AND DEVOUT LEADER OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY. AS A TEACHER AND A MEMBER OF THE

THE INTELLIGENTIA HE FELT IT HIS RESPONSIBILITY TO AT LEAST TRY TO UNDERSTAND THE THINKING OF THIS STRANGER FROM GALILEA. HIS INQUIRIES WERE NOT THE ~~RESULT~~ questions OF ONE WHO CAME IN HUMILITY BUT MERELY A CRUIOUS INTELLECTUAL, WHO DESIRED THE FURTHER UNDERSTANDING OF A NEW THOUGHT SYSTEM.

TO HIS QUESTIONS JESUS EXPLAINS THAT HIS GOSPEL DEMANDS A REBIRTH, A RENEWAL OF THE SPIRIT, BUT THIS NICODEMUS CANNOT COMPREHEND. "HOW CAN THIS BE?" HE ASKS. WHETHER HE EVER UNDERSTOOD, WHETHER HE BECAME A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST OR RETURNED TO HIS HOME UNAFFECTED WE ARE NOT TOLD. FOR AT VERSE 15 THE STORY ENDS AND THE EDITORIAL BEGINS.

THE WRITER CANNOT CONSTRAIN HIMSELF ANY LONGER. IMPOSSIBLE NICODEMUS, LIKE SO MANY, HAS FAILED TO GRASP THE MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL CONCEPTS, ~~THE CROSS~~ THE LOVE OF GOD. THE WRITER STOPS AND REFLECTS AND THEN ~~WRITES~~ DASHES DOWN A PASSAGE THAT IS EASILY ONE OF THE MOST INSPIRING IN THE WHOLE NEW TESTAMENT.

"FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE" AND SO ON THROUGH VERSE 21.

MARTIN LUTHER CALLED THIS ONE VERSE THE "GOSPEL IN MINATURE" AND THAT IT TRULY IS. IN ONE SENTENCE WE FIND THE LOVE OF GOD, REDEEMPTION IN HIS SON JESUS CHRIST, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ETERNAL LIFE. IF WE HAD TO BOIL IT DOWN I THINK WE COULD DO NO BETTER THAN JOHN 3?16.

BUT THIS IDEA THAT GOD LOVES THE WORLD IS NOT WITHOUT PROBLEMS, AS BASIC AS IT MAY BE. FOR CENTURIES MEN HAVE WONDERED HOW POSSIBLY COULD GOD LOVE THEM? OF IF HE DID WHY DIDN'T HE MAKE IT A LITTLE CLEARER? -THE APOSTLE PAUL WAS OVERWHELMED BY THE THOUGHT. ~~MORE~~ MORE THAN ANY OTHER HE WAS AWARE OF MAN'S SIN AND DEPRAVITY, OF MAN'S INABILITY TO DO GOOD. WHEN HE REALIZED THAT THROUGH IT ALL GOD STILL LOVES IT WAS A PROFOUND INSIGHT,-AN INSIGHT TO WHICH HE DEVOTED HIS LIFE.

MARTIN LUTHER TOO WAS PUZZLED WITH GOD'S FAITHFUL AND PATIENT LOVE THAT EXTENDED TO EVEN THE MOST MISERABLE SINNER. TO QUOTE HIM AGAIN HE ONCE SAID "IF I WERE AS OUR LORD GOD, AND THESE PEOPLE AS DISOBEDIENT AS THEY NOW BE, I WOULD KNOCK THE WORLD TO PIECES."

THE MORE WE THINK ABOUT IT THE MORE PERPLEXING IT BECOMES.- WE LOOK AT THE WORLD, AND THE MESS OF WARS AND HATRED THAT MEN HAVE CREATED: WE TAKE A LOOK AT OURSELVES HOW SELFISH AND PETTY WE CAN BE, AND WE WONDER.- HOW CAN IT BE THAT GOD LOVES ME? HOW CAN HE LOVE THIS MESS WE HAVE MADE OF MANKIND AND HIS WORLD? IT JUST SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE THAT A LOVE SO PATIENT AND LONG SUFFERING CAN EXIST.

history & contemporary

— ON THE OTHER HAND WE CAN ASK THE QUESTION, IF GOD LOVES US WHY DOESN'T HE PROVE IT? — WHY DOESN'T GOD MAKE THIS LIFE A PEACEFUL, JOY FILLED ETERNITY. IF HE IS ALL POWERFUL AND ALL LOVING WHY HAS HE ALLOWED ~~US TO CREATE~~ TO EXIST SO MUCH SUFFERING IN OUR MIDST?

OF COURSE WE POINT TO THE CROSS AS OUR PROOF OF A HEAVENLY FATHER'S LOVE. - BUT WHAT DOES A CROSS MEAN TO A SKEPTIC, OR TO US, WHEN WE DEMAND CONCRETE, CONTEMPORARY PROOF THAT WE ARE LOVED? HEREIN LIES THE BEAUTY OF OUR FAITH, AND THE TRUE SIGNIFI* CANCE OF WHAT HAPPENED ON CALVARY/ GOD DID NOT SEND A CONQUEROR TO ENFORCE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, HE DID NOT AND DOES NOT SEND A BAND OF ANGELS TO BE OUR LEGSILATORS, ~~XEXEXXX

WHOM THEIR HOPES ARE CENTERED, MAKING NO EFFORT TO HOLD HIM BACK, PREPARED TO RUN EVEN THAT RISK: FEELING THAT FOR THE EMANCIPATION OF THE MULTITUDES ENSLAVED OR THREATENED, AND FOR THE UPHOLDING OF TOTTERING HUMAN LIBERTIES, EVEN THAT PRICE IS NOT TOO VAST. ALL THAT THEY PAY DOWN, UNFLINCHINGLY, AND HAVING PAID,IT, SIT NOW IN AN EMPTIED HOME."

THIS IS PERHAPS THE BEST HUMAN ANALOGY TO THE BASIC TENENT OF JOHN 3:16, "FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON."

ONE OF THE BIGGEST STUMBLING BLOCKS IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S LOVE IS OUR IDEA ABOUT THE WILL OF GOD. IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE GOD LOVING MANKIND IF HE WILLS THAT WE SHOULD BE AFFLICTED WITH WARS, DISEASE AND SUFFERING. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO COMPREHEND A LOVING GOD WHO ALLOWS MILLIONS OF DEATHS IN GLOBAL CONFLICT. FOR CENTURIES AND DECADES CHRISTIAN THINKERS HAVE ALLOWED THE CONCEPT OF PREDESTINATION TO CLOUD THEIR THEORIES. PUSHED TO ITS LOGICAL END PREDESTINATION MEANS THAT ALL THINGS ARE FOR-ORDAINED, PLANNED AS A PART OF THE OPERATING DIVINE WILL. THIS INCLUDES WARS, SUFFERING, DEATH, DISEASE, IT MEANS HAPPINESS FOR SOME AND MISERY FOR OTHERS. IT MEANS THAT IF YOU OR I WERE TO WALK INTO THE PATH OF A SPEEDING CAR-IT WAS GOD'S WILL. It means all tragedy WITH THIS KIND OF THINKING IT IS NO WONDER WE HAVE TROUBLE COMPREHENDING GOD'S LOVE. EVEN TODAY THERE ARE MANY WHO FIND THIS CONTRADICTORY BELIEF MEANINGFUL.

IN SOME CIRCLES IN ~~MY~~ OUR OWN DENOMINATION, ~~PRESBYTERIAN~~ the church, THE BELIEF THAT THERE ARE TWO CLASSES OF PEOPLE STILL PERSISTS. THERE ARE THE ~~ELECT~~ Elect, THE ONES GOD HAS CHOSEN FOR SALVATION, AND WHO CAN DO ~~TO~~ NOTHING TO CHANGE HIS MIND: AND ON THE OTHER HAND THERE ARE THE DAMNED WHO BY GOD'S ~~CHOOSING~~ eternal decree ARE IMMUNE FROM SALVATION AND ALTHOUGH THEY MAY LEAD THE LIFE OF A SAINT THEY CAN IN NO WAY PARTICIPATE IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD. FROM HERE THE CONCEPT OF GOD'S WILL DETERIORATES EVEN FURTHER TO ~~THE~~ POINT ~~POINT~~ OF ABSURDITY. A TYPE of Spiritual Arrogance that is totally alien to the N.T. faith.

I HAVE IN MIND AN ILLUSTRATION THAT I CANNOT RESIST USING. ~~ABOUT A MONTH AGO~~ I ~~RECEIVED~~ IN THE MAIL A GIFT ~~SUBSCRIPTION~~ TO A WEEKLY PUBLICATION FROM WHEATON ~~ILLINOIS CALLED~~ THE SWORD OF THE LORD. IN EACH ISSUE THERE ARE ACCOUNTS OF THE WILL OF GOD IN OPERATION, FOR INSTANCE A TAVERN OWNER IS SHOT DOWN IN A ROBBERY ATTEMPT — THAT WAS GOD'S HAND. OR THE RECENT DEATH OF PURDUE'S GOLDEN GIRL, A 22 YEAR OLD NEWLY WED, GOD PUNISHED HER FOR HER ACTIVITIES. ~~I MUST ADMIT I AM TEMPTED TO LAUNCH AN ALL OUT OFFENSIVE AGAINST THIS SELF RIGHTEOUS NAUSEA.~~ This is the epitome of self righteous arrogance. - & a fundamental contradiction of God's love. I MENTION THESE EXAMPLES, HOWEVER, ONLY TO ILLUSTRATE HOW VERY FAR WE HAVE STRAYED FROM THE IDEA OF A GOD WHO SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS SON.

Billy Graham stock market → Billy Graham - stock M.

MEN HAVE ALWAYS TRIED TO SEE THE WILL OF GOD IN WARS AND GREAT POLITICAL UPHEAVALS. IT IS AMUSING TO READ THE EDITORIALS OF A "MIDDLE OF THE ROAD" BERLIN NEWSPAPER FROM

DIFFERENT TIMES OF CRISIS IN THE LAST GENERATION.

IT WELCOMED THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES AS THE DUE PUNISHMENT FOR THE OLD PRUSSIAN MILITARISM/ SURELY THE HAND OF GOD IN ACTION./ IN 1938 AFTER THE NAZI RISE TO POWER IT SAW IN ADOLF HITLER GOD ALMIGHTY PURGING THE NATION AND ALL OF EUROPE FOR ITS INIQUITY. /IN 1945 THE PAPER CALLED THE ALLIES GOD SENT MESSANGERS OF PEACE, LIBERATING IN THE NAME OF CHRISTIAN JUSTICE./ AND TODAY, IN THE RUSSIAN SECTOR, THE PAPER ASSURES ITS READERS THAT GOD'S OWN WILL IS IN OPERATION CHASTISING THE WEST AND CAPITALISM. I FIND THE BASIC TENENT OF THESE STANDS OFFENSIVE/ BUT I ALSO THINK THEY ARE DUBIOUS ON THE GROUNDS THAT IF THE LORD GOD HAS POLITICAL VIEWS I AM SURE HE ISN'T THAT FICKLE.

THE POINT IS THAT MANKIND HAS TRIED TO SEE GOD'S WILL AS AN EXPLANATION FOR ALL OF LIFE'S PROBLEMS AND IN SO DOING HAS MADE IT NIGH IMPOSSIBLE TO RECOGNIZE THE BASIC CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD AS LOVE. /

TO UNDERSTAND WE MUST GO BACK TO THE BEGINNING, TO GOD'S CREATION OF MAN. GOD CREATED BECAUSE HE LOVED,/ AND HE CREATED A BEING WITH DIGNITY. HE DID NOT FASHION MAN SO THAT HE COULD HAVE REMOTE CONTROL TOYS THAT DID ONLY HIS BIDDING./ ON THE CONTRARY, AS AN EXPRESSION OF HIS INFINITE LOVE HE GAVE MAN THE DIGNITY OF FREEDOM.

MAN IS ENDOWED WITH FREE WILL, THE ABILITY TO MAKE HIS OWN CHOICE, TO WEIGH ALL THINGS AND TO DECIDE FOR HIMSELF IN ALL MATTERS.

THIS FREEDOM IS THE MOST WONDERFUL AND AT THE SAME TIME THE MOST DANGEROUS OF ALL OF GOD'S GIFTS TO MAN. BECAUSE OF IT WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR LIVES, NOT GOD, BECAUSE OF IT WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT HAPPENS IN THE WORLD.

A PROMINENT THEOLOGIAN (N. BERDYAEV) HAS PUT IT BLUNTLY WHEN HE SAID, "IF HE SO PLEASES MAN IS FREE TO CHOSE HELL."

GOD SO LOVED THAT HE CREATED MAN WITH FREEDOM OF CHOICE. GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS SON. THE FREEDOM IS STILL THERE, THE RESPONSIBILITY IS ENTIRELY OURS. WE ARE COMPLETELY FREE TO ACCEPT THIS GIFT, OR LIKE NICODEMUS PROBABLY DID WE CAN TURN OUR BACKS AND RETURN HOME MAKING NO SENSE OF THIS GALILEAN.

THIS IS REAL DANGER, AND WHEN WE CONTEMPLATE THE MORNING WORDS OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN WE MUST NOT FORGET IT. the stakes are high

GOD LOVED US ENOUGH TO GIVE US FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. HE LOVED US ENOUGH TO OFFER ETERNAL LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST. HE HAS GIVEN HIS ALL, HIS LOVE HAS EXTENDED TO THE DEPTHS OF MANKIND. IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO EXERCISE OUR FREEDOM AND TO MAKE THE CHOICE.

What will be will be is begging the question
Personally - God loves us - but has given us the
option of rejecting him - our choice Finally.